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ABSTRACT

Five common assumptions are held by teachers about learners: (1) adults should choose what children need to learn; (2) oral language must be mastered before written language can be introduced; (3) real, whole language is too difficult for students learning language; (4) language learning is different in different languages, and simultaneous learning will be confusing; and (5) specifically for bilinguals, teaching in English is essential to school success and acculturation. There is research to dispute each of these assumptions. One instructional approach that incorporates recent research and rejects the assumptions is the whole language approach, which integrates all four skills (listening, speaking, reading, and writing), exposes children to language in real, functional contexts, encourages language exploration, and builds on the students' existing linguistic strengths. (MSE)

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Bilingual Learners:
How Our Assumptions Limit their World

"The assumptions we make limit what can be learned. Alter those assumptions and the potential for learning expands."[1]

Educators, parents, and even politicians have always made assumptions about how children learn. Some of their assumptions have been based on theory, others on research, and still others on what seemed to be common sense. These beliefs have influenced not only classroom methodology and family learning activities in homes but also local, state, and national legislation for education. Unfortunately, many assumptions have hindered, rather than helped children, especially bilingual children, in the process of learning.

Bilingual children have been misunderstood in this country for some time. Those who do not achieve certain levels on standardized tests or state-approved English language tests are often labeled as "Limited English Proficient" (LEP) or as "functionally illiterate."[2] Proponents of bilingual education point out that children labelled LEP's are often believed to be semilingual or to have no language.[3] In the case

of Hispanics, the child, the child's family, and the child's culture have traditionally been blamed for lack of success in schools.[4] As a result, since the beginning of the century, instructional models for Spanish speaking students in this country have been based on the idea of deficit.

Flores lists several kinds of deficits educators and the general public have used to explain academic failure of Hispanics in our schools.

> 1920's- Spanish speaking children were considered mentally retarded due to language difficulty.
> 1930's- Bilingualism and its effects upon the reading aspects of language was considered a problem.
> 1940's- Because of their "language problem", Mexican children should be segregated.
> 1950's- Schools must provide for deficiencies by providing "a rich and satisfying program."
> 1960's- The child's home and language were the primary cause of school failure.
> 1970's- If bilingual children code switch, mix their languages, it is an indication that they know neither well.[5]

Minority language children in the 80's suffer from a more subtle deficit image. Cummins and other proponents of bilingual education have proposed that LEP students need to develop their first language before

learning the second in order to develop cognitively.[6] Maintaining the first language is extremely important for bilingual children. However, this theory subtly implies that children who do not learn concepts in their native language will be cognitively deficient. The impression left is that bilingual learners are somehow inferior.[7]

Throughout the century there seems to have been one dominant theme that has emerged in discussions and writing about language minority children: The solution for the problems of bilingual learners will come from adults who make decisions about and for the learner. The problem with having adults make all the decisions is that the child is ignored. LEP students are victims of what Freire terms the 'banking' concept of education. "In the banking concept of education, knowledge is a gift bestowed by those who consider themselves knowledgeable upon those whom they consider to know nothing." Students passively receive deposits of knowledge to file and store. Since teachers know the language and LEP students do not, "the teacher teaches and the students

are taught"..."the teacher talks and the students listen-meekly..."the teacher chooses and enforces his choice, and the students comply."■

The idea that learners learn what teachers teach is one of five common assumptions held by those who make decisions for and about learners. This article first examines these assumptions and cites theorists and researchers who dispute them. Then, a teaching/learning program founded on assumptions that come from recent research is presented. This program does not approach bilingualism as a deficit, but, rather sees it as a base upon which teachers and learners can build and develop their full potential.

The Teacher Teaches and the Student Learns Assumption

The first basic assumption many educators operate on is that adults should choose what it is children need to learn. Implicit in this attitude is the assumption that what is taught is what is learned. In addition, what adults choose to teach will be influenced by their view of the learner. In language learning, for example, children have

been viewed differently by different educators. Lindfors suggests different images for language learners that reflect how the learner and learning have been viewed. The "plant" image, for example, suggests that learners are passive and receive nourishment from outside sources but do nothing for themselves. The "hunter/gatherer" image, on the other hand, sees learners as active as they gather bits and pieces of language through drills and practice. However, children are then expected to put the bits and pieces together in "real life" situations that are very different from the classroom. In the "builder "image children actually "do" things with language as they actively construct meanings. While this image is a good one, it ignores the importance of interaction. Children must not only "act on materials" but also "interact with them." Lindfors believes that the best image is of language learners as flexible "explorers" who interact with their environment, their peers, and their teachers as they learn about the world." Children actively "learn how to

mean"[10] in meaningful, functional social interaction.

The place of the teacher in the explorer image is one of facilitator and fellow explorer. The classroom should be teacher-structured but not teacher-centered allowing students to engage in social interaction and learn language not by "learning about language" but by "learning through language."[11] This approach is very different from the assumption that the teacher's job is to teach and the learner's job is to learn what is taught.

Oral Language Supremacy Assumption

Whatever image they hold of learners, one of the most common assumptions that teachers make about the teaching of language is that oral language must be mastered before written language can be introduced. Harste, Woodward, and Burke discovered that preschool and kindergarten teachers often ignore meaningful reading and writing activities in language arts because they assume their job is to develop oral language.[12] The same kind of attitude persists in a large number of

second language and bilingual classrooms where teachers delay the use of written language.[13]

In second language teaching, oral language has had supremacy since the formulation of the slogan inspired by structural linguists: "Language is speech, not writing." [14] In two popular approaches to language teaching, The Natural Approach and Total Physical Response, speaking, reading, and writing are postponed to give students an oral comprehension base first.[15] For example, the general belief among some language educators is that readers must be able to say the words to understand them.[16] However, research is disproving this. Krashen, whose hypotheses form the basis for The Natural Approach, has found that "reading exposure" or" reading for genuine interest with a focus on meaning" provides language learners with reading "comprehensible input" similar to oral "comprehensible input". The reading exposure contributes to second language just as oral language does. In a book on writing, Krashen proposes that reading contributes to

competence in writing just as listening helps children acquire oral language.[17]

Hudelson reports on research which supports Krashen's more recent views. Children who speak little or no English can read print in the environment and can write English using it for various purposes. In fact, Hudelson found that some second language learners can write and read with greater mastery of English than their oral performance might indicate.[18] Along those same lines, Edelsky's research in bilingual classrooms indicates that written expression in English may precede formal reading instruction and that bilingual learners use knowledge of their first language and of the world and actively apply their knowledge as they write.[19]

The research suggests, then, that functional reading and writing as well as speaking and listening activities should be integral parts of all language classrooms because all processes interact with each other. This idea has been graphically explained by Burke whose "Linguistic Data Pool" shows how individual reading, writing,

speaking, and listening encounters all feed into a common "pool" from which other encounters draw.[20] The data pool concept suggests that requiring students to master oral skills before they write and read actually can limit language learning potential.

The Assumption that Language Broken into Parts is Easier to Learn

A third assumption that many educators hold is that real, whole language is often too difficult for students learning language. This is obvious from the textbooks used and the kinds of exercises that are suggested for language students. In first language exercises children are asked to underline parts of speech, put in capital letters and punctuation, and circle pictures of things that begin with the same sound. In second language books, students fill in correct verb forms, substitute plurals for singulars, and practice minimal pair sounds. In both cases, the assumption is made that mastery of these exercises dealing with parts of language in isolation will lead to mastery of real

language . The faulty assumption is that if students begin with simplified sentences and isolated grammar points, they will more easily be able to build up to the production of correct, whole language. In other words, some educators believe that learning goes from part to whole and that it is the teacher's job to select and present the parts the students need to learn.

However, several researchers contend that language is learned from whole to part rather than from part to whole. Vygotsky believed that word meanings, for instance, develop in a functional way from whole to part even though in quantity language seems to develop from part to whole as the child moves from one word to several words to full sentences.

> In regard to meaning...the first word of the child is a whole sentence. Semantically, the child starts from the whole, from a meaningful complex, and only later begins to master the separate semantic units, the meanings of words, and to divide his formerly undifferentiated thought into those units.[21]

Even though children do begin speaking in single words, the words really represent whole ideas that have broad and often vague

meanings. These meanings move from whole, generalized meanings towards more definite specific meanings close to adult meanings. K. Goodman explains that we are "...first able to use whole utterances..." and that "Only later can we see the parts in the wholes and begin to experiment with their relationship to each other and to the meaning of the whole."[22]

Therefore, language in the classroom should be kept whole, and attention should be focussed on meaning. Bilingual and ESL educators are beginning to realize that language is communication and not a separate subject made up of skills to be taught in isolation. Wong-Fillmore found that teachers who saw the task of teaching language as "...explicit instruction on the language..." rather than language "...as a medium of communication..." provided poor instruction.[23] Enright and McClosky point out that teachers in communicative bilingual and ESL classrooms "... speak of developing 'literacy' and 'communicative competence' rather than of teaching 'reading,' 'writing,' and 'language arts'..."[24] When the language

is kept whole, the focus is not on the linguistic system, but on content that is functional and meaningful for students. This accomplishes what Goodman calls the "double agenda". The students are developing concepts through study of the content and, at the same time, teachers are aware that the students are learning language.[28]

The Assumption that Language Learning is Different in Different Languages

Even teachers who believe in a communicative approach for the teaching of English as a second language and teach reading and writing with a focus on meaning, often switch to a phonics approach for the teaching of reading in the first language. This may be because the teachers themselves remember learning their first language through phonics, but it may also be due to the misconceptions that exist about language difference. Barrera points out that in Spanish-English bilingual education there exist the notions that "First-language reading and second-language reading are disparate processes." and that

"Language-based differences in second-language reading are reading problems to be eradicated."

Many educators believe that Spanish reading "...is different from reading in English-that it is much easier- because of the greater regularity of the Spanish sound-letter system."[26] This view of instruction encourages a phonics approach which emphasizes the code rather than meaning. However, Barrera points out that reading in the first and second language are both meaning-seeking processes. Miscue analysis research done with children reading in their first language has revealed that Hispanic, Polish, Yiddish, and Arabic children are not "...bound by letter-by-letter processing of print..." but use both "...selected visual cues and their knowledge of language and the real world to anticipate, to predict, and to hypothesize about print."[27]

There also exists the concern that teaching children two languages at once will confuse them. The belief is that because the two languages are different, they will

interfere with each other and children will learn neither language. Children in bilingual programs in the United States who are learning to speak, read and write their first language will naturally be learning English at the same time because of their surroundings. Children hear English spoken by others at school, in stores, and on television. Much of the print in the environment is in English. Children respond to the English in their environment and when encouraged, can learn to understand, speak, read, and write in both their first and second language at the same time.[2]

The "Melting Pot" Assumption

The first four assumptions, although they impact on bilingual children, affect all learners. The final assumption, however, directly applies to bilingual learners. This is the assumption that teaching in English is essential to school success and to acculturation.

In his speech to the Association for a Better New York, U.S. Secretary of Education, William Bennett stated, " In America...we can

say 'E Pluribus Unum;' out of many we have become one".[29] Though Mr. Bennett went on to say we "respect our differences; each of us is justly proud of his own ethnic heritage", the Secretary of State's basic message was that minority children should be taught English and English only, and schools should not waste time and money teaching the native language. The underlying political philosophy expressed is one of assimilation. Assimilationists believe that our country is a "melting pot" and hold a nationalist, isolationist point of view like that expressed by Theodore Roosevelt in 1917:

> ...any man who comes here...must adopt the institutions of the United States, and therefore he must adopt the language which is now the native tongue of our people... It would be not merely a matter of misfortune but a crime to perpetuate differences of language in this country...[30]

Freire explains how the 'oppressors', those in control of the society, use the banking concept of education to be sure that those who deviate from the "good, organized and just society" are "integrated and incorporated."[31] Of course, the oppressors believe their goals are humanitarian and that

they know what is best for the oppressed. Is this not the situation that exists in this country when decisions about what should and should not be learned are made for minority children? The educator and politician claim to have the good of the minority child in mind when they say that bilingual education is failing to provide children with "...full participation in this remarkable nation of ours..." and that English only should be taught because "...a sense of cultural pride cannot come at the price of proficiency in English, our common language."[32]

However, many proponents of bilingual education have a pluralistic view of the place of the minority child in our society and reject the 'melting pot' image. Instead of having to conform to the majority culture and language, bilingual children should be encouraged to maintain their first language and culture, develop their second language and understand the second culture in order to participate fully in it.[33] A better image than the melting pot is the 'salad bowl'. In this view children can be part of the entire salad adding flavor or spice but at same time

maintaining their individuality. In fact, in a truly pluralistic society, bilingualism is promoted for all students, not just minority students.[34] In a pluralistic society, bilingual citizens come to understand not only languages, but other cultures and points of view in order to deal with the modern problems of society.

A Whole Language Approach for the Bilingual Learner

One approach to education that incorporates recent research and rejects the assumptions discussed above, is the whole language approach. In the first place, whole language rejects the notion that a class should be teacher-centered. In 1929 John Dewey said, "The child is the starting point, the center, and the end..."[35] The examination of the assumptions above supports Dewey's view and suggests that learners are capable of doing more than adults/teachers think they can. In making classroom decisions, then, educators might do well to turn to the child as informant. Y. Goodman proposes that all teachers should be "kid watchers" and

carefully observe students in action in the classroom. By watching children, teachers can gain insights into how learning takes place and be more able to meet students's needs.[34]

In a whole language classroom, teachers integrate speaking, listening, reading, and writing. They do not assume that oral language must be mastered before written language can be introduced. Instead, they recognize that oral language can build on written language and that learners can not afford to delay the development of literacy skills.

Rather than breaking down language into parts in order to simplify it, whole language teachers realize that language develops naturally when children are exposed to language in real, functional contexts. Instead of trying to "teach" the language the students do not know, they encourage students to explore language and make discoveries on their own. Research has shown that children learn when they are active participants in the learning process. Smith says that children do not learn when (1) they already know it, (2) they don't understand it, (3)

they don't want to risk.[37] In whole language classrooms teachers help students explore what they do not already know in a meaningful way, drawing upon what they do know in a way that makes sense to the children.

Whole language teachers also realize that although languages differ, the process of learning language is the same for all students. Language is learned when it is functional and meaningful to the learner. Therefore, a whole language classroom offers students functional tasks that are an extension of natural learning outside the classroom in an atmosphere that encourages children to take risks as they make sense of the world.[38] Bilingual students are capable of drawing upon both their languages as they learn.

Goodman, Goodman, and Flores point out that "The basic assumption on which to build the bilingual curriculum, including biliteracy, must be based on sound views about language and language learning."[39] Therefore, in a whole language classroom, instead of beginning with the one thing the child lacks - English - teachers build on

strengths. Bilingual children do not have deficits but strengths. They should be able to expand on their background experience, drawing on knowledge of their first language and culture, to develop both languages and become both bilingual and bicultural. Our goal as educators is not to assimilate bilingual children into our "melting pot" but to allow them to add flavor, texture, and spice to our society's "salad".

Notes

[1]J. Harste, V. Woodward and C. Burke, Language Stories and Literacy Lessons (Portsmouth N.H.:Heinemann Educational Books, 1984).

[2]E. Thonis, "Reading Instruction for Language Minority Students," Schooling and Language Minority Students: a Theoretical Framework. (Los Angeles: California Evaluation, Dissemination, and Assessment Center, 1983).

[3]This observation has been made by P. Pelosi in "Imitative Reading with Bilingual Students," Ethnoperspectives on Bilingual Education Research, ed. R. Padilla (Ypsilanti, Mich.:Dept. of Foreign Languages and Bilingual Studies, 1981) and by T. Carter and R. Segura in Mexican Americans in School. (New York: College Entrance Examination Board, 1979) among others.

[4]E. Hernandez-Chavez, "The Inadequacy of English Immersion Education as an Educational Approach for Language Minority Students in the United States," Studies on Immersion Education, (Sacramento: California State Department of Education, 1984).

[5]B. Flores, Language Interference or Influence: Toward a Theory of Hispanic Bilingualism, (Tucson: unpublished doctoral dissertation, 1982).

[6]J. Cummins, "The Role of Primary Language Development in Promoting Educational Success for Language Minority Students," Schooling and Language Minority Students: a Theoretical Framework, (Los Angeles: California Evaluation, Dissemination, and Assessment Center, 1983).

[7]See Flores (note 5 above) and C. Edelsky, "The Effect of 'Theory' on THEORY -- and other Phenomena," Presidential address, 1985 Anual Conference of the Linguistic Association of the Soouthwest, Houston,Texas.

[8]P. Freire, Pedagogy of the Oppressed, trans. Myra Ramos (New York: Penguin Books, 1972) p. 46-47.

[9]J. Lindfors, "Exploring in and through Language," On TESOL '82, ed. M. Clark and J. Handscombe (Washington D.C.: TESOL, 1982).

[10]M. Halliday, Learning How to Mean - Explorations in the Development of Language, (Wheeling, Ill.: Whitehall Co., 1975).

[11]Teacher-structured classes are discussed by L. Wong-Fillmore in "The Language Learner as an Individual: Implications of Research on Individual Differences for the ESL Teacher," On TESOL '82, ed. M. Clarke and J. Handscombe (Washington, D.C.: TESOL, 1982). The importance of social interaction is the theme of G. Wells' Learning through Interaction, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981). M. Halliday (see note 10 above) differentiates between learning language, learning about language and learning through language.

[12]Harste, Woodward and Burke (see note 1 above).

[13]S. Hudelson, "Kan Yu Ret and Rayt en Ingles: Children Become Literate in English," TESOL Quarterly, 18 (1984), pp. 221-239.

[14]These slogans are discussed by K. Diller, The Language Teaching Controversy, (Rowley, Ma.: Newbury House, 1979) p. 19.

[15]For descriptions of these approaches see J. Asher, "The Total Physical Response Approach to Second Language Learning," Modern Language Journal, 53 (1969) pp. 3-17 and S. Krashen and T. Terrell, The Natural Approach, (New York: Pergammon Press, 1983).

[16]Thonis (see note 2 above).

[17]Krashen discusses reading in Inquiries and Insights, (Hayward, Ca.: Alemany Press, 1985) and writing in Writing: Research, Theory and Applications, (New York: Pergammon Press, 1984).

[18]Hudelson (see note 13 above).

[19]C. Edelsky, "Writing in a Bilingual Program: the Relation of L1 and L2 Texts," TESOL Quarterly 16 (1982) pp. 211-229.

[20]The image of the data pool is developed by Carolyn Burke (note 1 above).

[21]L. Vygotsky, Language and Thought, (Cambridge, Ma.: M.I.T. Press, 1962), p. 126.

[22]K. Goodman, What's Whole in Whole Language? (Portsmouth, N.H.: Heinemann Educational Books, 1986) pp. 19-20.

[23]L. Wong-Fillmore (note 11 above), p. 170.

[24]D. Enright and M. McCloskey, "Yes, Talking! Organizing the Classroom to Promote Second Language Acquisition," TESOL Quarterly, 19 (1985) pp. 431-453.

[25]K. Goodman, "Unity in Reading," Becoming Readers in a Complex Society, ed. A. Purves and O. Niles (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1984).

[26]R. Barrera, "Bilingual Reading in the Primary Grades: Some Questions about Questionable Views and Practices," Early Childhood Bilingual Education: A Hispanic Perspective, ed. T. Escobedo (New York: Columbia University Press, 1983).

[27]Learning to Read in Different Languages, ed. S. Hudelson (Washington, D.C.: Center for Applied Linguistics, 1981), p. v.

[28]Both Barrera (note 26 above) and Hudelson (note 13 above) discuss how exposure to environental print develops literacy.

[29]W. Bennett, Press release of address to Association for a Better New York, Sept. 26, 1985.

[30]Roosevelt is quoted in J. Gonzalez, "Coming of Age in Bilingual/Bicultural Education: A Historical Perspective," Bilingual Multicultural Education and the Professional: from Theory to Practice, ed. H. Trueba and C. Barnett-Mizrahi (Rowley, Ma.: Newbury House, 1979), p. 3.

[31]Freire (see note 8 above), p. 48.

[32]Bennett (see note 29 above).

[33]H. Trueba, "Implications of Culture for Bilingual Education," in Trueba and Barnett-Mizrahi (see note 30 above).

[34]W. Tikunoff, Ssignificant Features Study in Bilingual Education, (California: Far West Laboratories for Educational Research and Development, 1980).

[35]J. Dewey, My Pedagogic Creed, (Washington, D.C.: The Progressive Education Association, 1929), p. 14.

[36]Y. Goodman, "Kid Watching," National Elementary School Principal, 57 (1978) pp. 41-45.

[37]F. Smith, Psycholinguistics and Reading, (New York: Holt, Rinehart, and Winston, 1973).

[38]K. Goodman and Y. Goodman, "A Whole-Language Comprehension Centered Reading Program," Occasional papers no. 1, Tucson, Az. Program in Language and Literacy, 1981.

[39]K. Goodman, Y. Goodman and B. Flores, Reading in the Bilingual Classroom: Literacy and Biliteracy, (Rosslyn, Va.: National Clearinghouse for Bilingual Education, 1979).